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Outsiders Inside 'Accidental Genius' at Milwaukee Art Museum

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VISUALART REVIEW

Outsiders Inside 'Accidental Genius' at Milwaukee Art Museum

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

Artists, by their nature, tend to operate on the borders of social conventions, and often outside the boundaries of established artistic practices. On the edge of contemporary interest in art today are the "self-taught" artists being shown in the exhibition "Accidental Genius" at the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) through May 6. This exhibit features more than 200 paintings, drawings and objects by international artists from the collection of Milwaukee collector Anthony Petullo. Most are selected from the collector's gift of 312 works to the museum.

The exhibition is organized loosely into areas featuring draftsmanship (Joseph Yoakum, American, Scottie Wilson, British, Anna Zemánková, Moravian); landscape (James Dixon, Irish, Sylvia Levine, English); sculpture (Nek Chand, Indian); popular culture (Eddie Arning, American,



James Lloyd, English); and works created by artists from the House of Artists sanatorium in Austria. However, its rich variety of imaginative themes does not easily fall into discrete categories. Viewers will want to find their own paths exploring this intriguing array of diverse images.

Among the highlights of the exhibition is a two-sided panorama by Henry Darger (1892-1973), a Chicago artist who worked as a janitor. One side shows children happily at play in images bearing the influences of comics; the other shows *Images of Men Strangling Children*. This work, like many others in the exhibition, reveals the often-beguiling psychological struggles underlying the creative forces represented in this art. It is a fact that some of the finest artworks by self-taught artists were created under conditions of personal stress and social isolation.

Offsetting the shock of *Men Strangling Children* are Justin McCarthy's delightfully whimsical *The Mad Tea Party* and Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern's naughty *Demoness of Urgency*. The latter, an example of masterful graphic design with undertones of sexuality, is featured on the catalog cover.

Why, then, is this particular exhibition special? First, the selected works represent three decades of loving care and dedication from a knowledgeable collector with an eye for quality. As visitors will see, these artists' works seamlessly assume their place alongside works by artists whose ca-

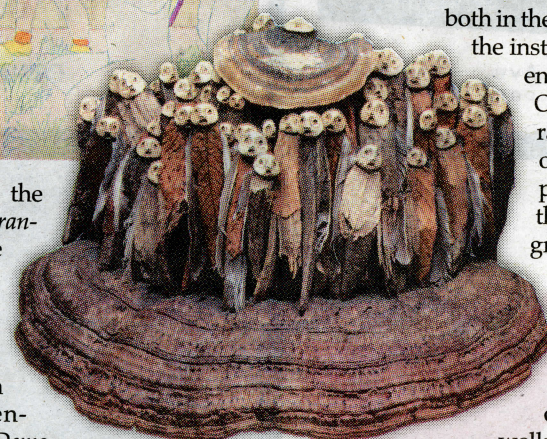
reers are based on formal art training and more obvious links to the histories of art. Further, the exhibition celebrates a gift of great importance to the museum as a major center for self-taught artists by building on the already significant holdings in the MAM's Hall Collection.

On another level, "Accidental Genius" affirms the international importance of a category of art that was long ignored or marginalized. No longer can this art be ignored as simply "outsider" or "naïve" art.

Why is art by self-taught artists increasingly welcome in the art world? The reasons for this new interest are complex. Not the least is the desire for fresh materials, both in the art market and in the institutions that present art to the public.

Or is it perhaps the radical pluralism of the contemporary art world that demands greater inclusiveness? There is always the risk that overexposure will compromise these often-fragile wells of creativity. On

the other hand, sharing these works with the public in a museum setting affords due recognition to the artists and enriches the art experiences of the public.



(above left) Henry Darger (1892-1973), *Images of Men Strangling Children*, watercolor, pencil, carbon and collage on paper; (above right) Jephian DeVilliers, *Reve d'envolement porte par la foret tranquille*, wood with applied collage elements, 1999

VISUALART PREVIEW

GREYMATTER GALLERY LOOKS TO 'REALIGN'

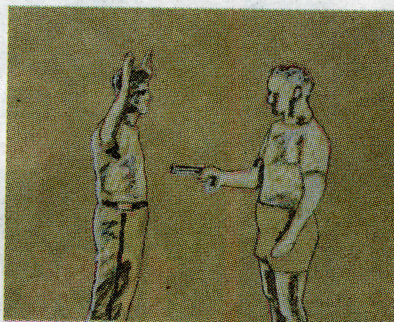
BY PEGGY SUE DUNIGAN

Last summer, rising artists Zina Mussmann and Rachel Quirk reinvented their studio space by opening the art gallery **Greymatter** with great success. They presented intriguing exhibitions by other artists in their cozy gallery on the second floor of the Historic Third Ward's Marshall Building. Soon, Mussmann and Quirk will feature their own works in "ReAlign."

Mussmann's small, figurative drawings also will be displayed in the Charles Allis Art Museum's "Forward 2012: A Survey of Wisconsin Art Now" exhibition opening March 2. In the artist's new work, miniature figures reflect ominous narratives colored in a restrained palette. When the drawings are placed together into trip-

tychs, Mussmann explains, the works play with text and might "lead the viewer into a narrative of their own choosing."

Quirk expands on her previous work involving photo transfer images placed on muslin. This new approach creates mystery in the images by portraying vintage female figures, seen from the back, in shades of charcoal gray. The figures' emotional mind-sets and facial features remain ambiguous, with fleeting glimpses of gestures that hint at their true motives.



Zina Mussmann, *Untitled*, mixed media on paper, 2012

The ambitious Mussmann and Quirk also have plans to expand their gallery space by renovating an adjacent storeroom. In the meantime, Greymatter's feature exhibition "ReAlign" opens for the building's exclusive "Marshall Arts Event" on Friday, March 2, 5-9 p.m.

VISUALART HAPPENINGS

KOHL'S EDUCATION CENTER GRAND OPENING
Milwaukee Art Museum
700 N. Art Museum Drive

Special family events and activities mark the opening of the new Kohl's Education Center at the Milwaukee Art Museum 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Feb. 25.

THE WHITE SHOW
James Steeno Gallery
5700 W. Vliet St.

Six Milwaukee artists work in mixed media to interpret "white" as a color and an idea. An opening reception takes place 5-9 p.m. Friday, Feb. 24.